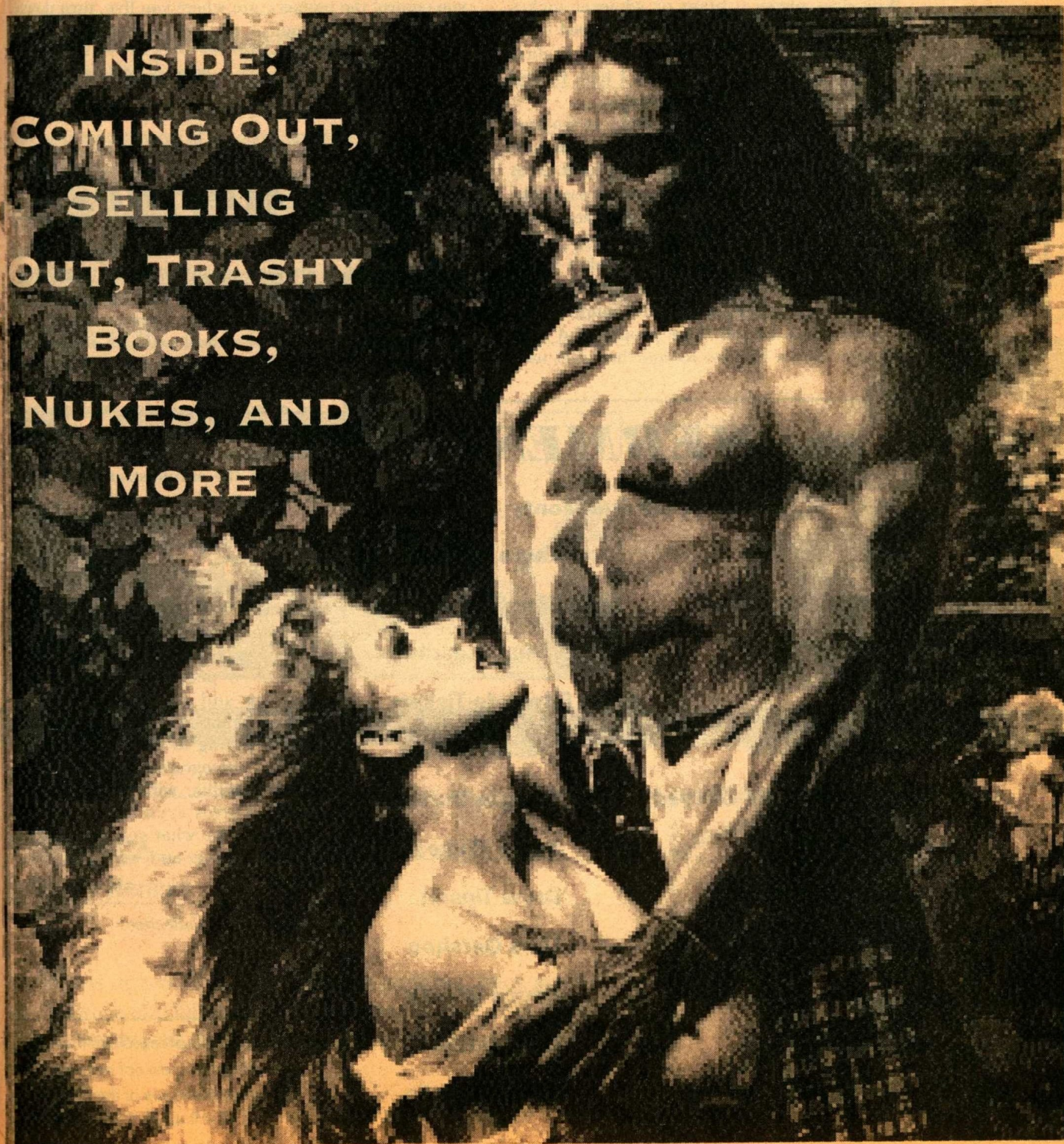


NOVEMBER 1997

# HERMES

WESLEYAN'S MAGAZINE OF POLITICAL, CRITICAL, AND CREATIVE THOUGHT

**INSIDE:  
COMING OUT,  
SELLING  
OUT, TRASHY  
BOOKS,  
NUKES, AND  
MORE**



## Heat Politics

How many times have you had this experience? It's winter, you go into a building for class, you are bowled over by the heat. If you wear glasses, they steam up. After all, you've come from outside, where it's cold. You're dressed for cold. Inside, it is something ridiculous like 80 degrees.

Why does physical plant or whoever makes these decisions believe that the temperature must be so high that we could comfortably sit through class naked? You probably believe this, too. I hate it, and not just because it makes me uncomfortable.

For one thing, having buildings at tropical temperatures makes for a lot of work taking clothes off at the beginning of class and putting them back on at the end. More importantly, though, doesn't it seem like a waste of energy? You can't recycle the energy used for heating and that's rather a lot of energy, when you're talking about a whole campus. Couldn't we be saving both energy and money by turning the heat down a few degrees? Some people would complain, I'm sure. You know what I'd tell those people? Put on a fucking sweater. Add a blanket to your bed. Get used

to it.

Why is it common practice to advocate vegetarianism or driving less for environmental reasons, while the idea of turning the heat down a few degrees is completely foreign to most people? It's easier to put on a sweater or an extra blanket than to learn how to come up with and cook a balanced diet without meat or rearrange your life so that you have to drive less. (Mind you, I think these are lovely things to do.) So, if you control the temperature where you live, turn down the heat, unless, of course, it's already down (by which I mean 62 degrees or less).

-Laura Clawson

## Why Hermes?

Around seven issues of *Hermes* are produced a year. We publish a wide range of material, including articles on campus life, activism and critical social commentary. Among other things, *Hermes* serves as a forum for progressive and radical activists, in hope of increasing activism and social awareness at Wesleyan.

Even though we have a leftist slant, we encourage criticism and controversy. We also aren't beyond a little investigative reporting on the dirty deeds of the administration, a form of activism in its own right.

The staff of *Hermes* meets once a week in the WSA building (190 High St.). We are organized in a collective, nonhierarchical, informal manner. There are no permanent positions and nobody is in charge; decisions are made by the entire staff. New people are welcome to show up and get involved at any time. In addition to writers, we need people willing to do proof-reading, editing, photography and lay-out; if you are familiar with Macintosh and Quark Xpress even better. And if you don't like what you find written here — join us and write your own articles.

-The Hermes Collective



## HERMES

### Goes the Full Monty

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Throbbing Manhood	Laura Clawson
Rod	Vishal Gujadhur
Weeny	Brian Edwards-Tiekert
Passion's Sword	Rachel Brown
He Who Must Be Obeyed	Aongus Burke
Mr. Wiggles	Sarah Wilkes
Red-Headed Warrior	Drew Tipson
Joy Stick	Livia Gershon
Shaft	Emma Brooks
Writhing Serpent	Jesse Kudler
Happy Tower	Justin Tamplin

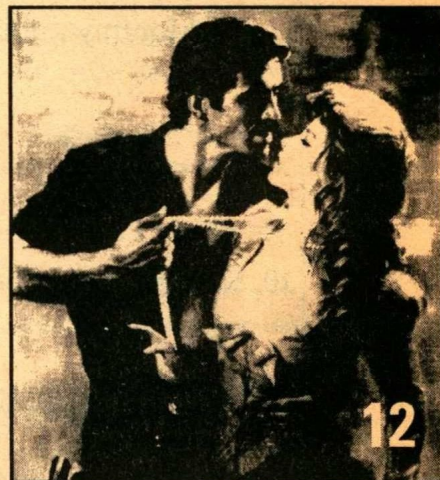
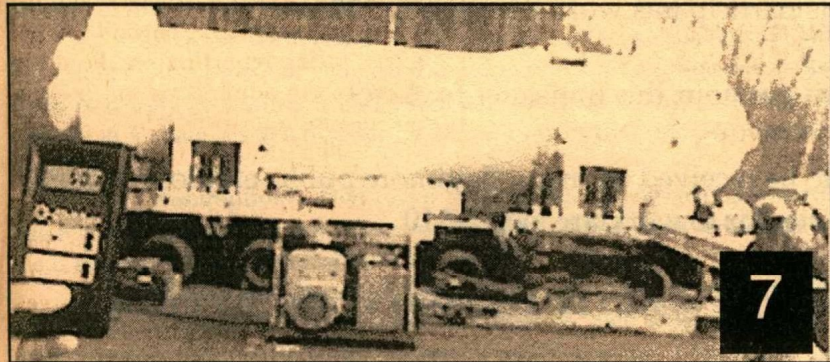
All opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Hermes staff.

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Hermes is now online, with constant updates, back issues, and other useful information. Save paper, hurt your eyes.  
<http://www.con.wesleyan.edu/groups/hermes>

Cover design by Laura Clawson and Livia Gershon



HERMES November, 1997

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(With apologies to Harper's Magazine)

1. Percentage of Pulitzer Prize winners from 1991-1995 who had attended journalism school: 41
2. Percent of voters on the *US News and World Report* college rankings who were unfamiliar with some of the schools they were asked to rank: 84
3. Percent of participants in this year's Southern Baptist convention who eat pastry and/or donuts for breakfast, according to a convention survey: 61
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6. Incidences of "tampering" at WestCo this year, as reported by Public Safety: 5
7. Monthly public assistance received by workfare participants in Maryland: \$350
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11. Collective wealth owned by the world's 447 billionaires in 1996: \$1.1 trillion
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13. Percent of all raw materials consumed in the US that are involved in the production of animal-based foods: 33
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Sources: 1,2: *Rolling Stone*, October 16, 1997, pp. 77, 97; 3: *Newsweek*, October 6, 1997, p. 8; 7-12: *The Nation*, October 31, 1997, pp. 7, 12; 13-15: *Why Vegan?* (figures from U.S. Departments of Commerce and Interior).

# Letters Letters Letters Letters



REFLECTIONS

Dear Hermes,

Regarding last issue's article "Your Guide to Being P.C. at Queer Wesleyan," why did you exclude Bisexuals from the queer community at Wesleyan? Burke's decision to ignore bisexuality can be interpreted as a polemical act against bisexuals. Whether it was a conscious or accidental omission, I feel that there are many important issues surrounding bisexuals

As I understand it, a bisexual person is attracted to and pursues relationships with members of both the same sex and the opposite sex (not necessarily at the same time). Some may experience a range of sexual attraction; they are not "half gay and half straight." Some defy categorization by calling themselves "androgynous," "flexible," or "asexual" or by saying "I fall in love with people, not their gender." Although I can not speak for all bisexuals and all situations, I think that a big frustration for them is not being taken seriously and having assumptions made about them.

On one hand, bisexuals can fit in with heterosexual and queer communities, and on the other hand they can feel excluded from both (as Burke's article exemplifies). Some people say that bisexuals just can't make up their mind and that they are confused lesbian, gay or straight people. Certainly many people experiment with sexual practices before discovering what feels right for them, whether they try something and like it, or try something and don't like it. However, I propose that there is a difference between experimentation, trying out what it's like with different genders, and being attracted to and pursuing relationships with people of both sexes (and still knowing who you are). What right do people have to question how someone else feels on such a personal level? I would think that bisexuality is something based on personal feelings, attractions and actions. I hope that people can respect those feelings, however they may be expressed.

Some people believe that bisexuals are just identifying as such in order to be trendy or because of social pressure. Coming to Wesleyan, students are pressured into questioning sexuality and experimenting. Wesleyan also provides a uniquely open environment where people may discover more opportunities that were not so easily pursued or explored in high school. Thus, for some people, bisexual behavior may be a stage that they go through in discovering who they are, and what their preferences are. Whether bisexuality be a stage or a chosen way of life, it is no less valid.

Here at Wesleyan, it is often more cool to not be normal, and this can pose a difficulty for bisexuals. For example, if a bisexual is engaged in a heterosexual relationship, s/he is often dismissed as no longer being bi. Being bi is only cool when it involves same sex flings. This is, of course, entirely missing the point. If someone engages in a same sex relationship, it doesn't mean that one becomes straight or gay for the duration of the relationship.

Assumptions. Don't ever make them. If you meet a woman who has dated a woman, do not assume that she is a lesbian and not interested in men. If you meet a woman who has dated a man, do not assume that she is straight and not interested in women.

What right do people have to question how we identify ourselves and who we are? What right do people have to question how someone else feels on such a personal level? I would think that bisexuality is something based on personal feelings, attractions and actions. I hope that people can respect those feelings, however they may be expressed.

Sincerely,  
Juniper Hill '98

Aongus Burke responds: "A polemic against bisexuals"? Ouch! Actually, I originally did intend to include "bisexual" in the guide. I had a little trouble initially, thinking of controversies concerning the proper usage of the word bisexual, and intended to get back to it, but of course I never did. Perhaps that's a good thing, because I never would have been able to do the issue the justice you have. Watch for a more detailed look at the issues of bisexuality, the continuum of sexual orientation, and fluid sexuality in a future issue of Hermes.

## Write to Us!

Hey,  
Do you hate what you see in this issue? Think the Hermes staff is a bunch of morons? Well, we think the same of you. But write us anyway. And if you have something to say that won't fit on this page, feel free to write an article, rant, or piece of expressive poetry.

P.S. And if you think our layout sucks, we won't be offended if you want to join us and prove you can do a better job.



# Working Men, Naked and Clothed

by Laura Clawson

Recently, I was involved in a discussion about the recent British movies *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*. Most of you probably know that *The Full Monty* is about laid-off steelworkers who become strippers for money. *Brassed Off* is about a colliery's brass band which is preparing for a brass band competition at the same time as the colliery is being shut down, leaving the workers in the band without jobs. (If you didn't see the movie, you may have heard part of it: the bit about "I thought that music mattered" at the beginning of Chumbawamba's song "Tubthumping" is from *Brassed Off*.)

One participant in this discussion pointed out that, although the two movies share the disappearance of good working-class jobs in Britain as their backdrop, *The Full Monty* promotes cross-class alliances and individual entrepreneurship, while *Brassed Off* portrays a labor movement based in collective action and strong class consciousness. Shockingly, *The Full Monty*'s combination of less leftwing politics and male strippers has been more popular (at least in the US) than excellent politics and brass bands, which is a shame; both movies deserve success. This person suggested that *The Full Monty*'s success is largely a result of its promise of male nudity, which he feels has an unfortunate tendency to overshadow other aspects of films (he pointed to *The Crying Game* as another example).

Now, *The Full Monty* is, compared to most American movies, way left of center. After all, it depicts people who, after years of working hard, are left in a city in which there is no work except as a security guard at some Walmart sort of store. Even the suit-wearing manager has been unable to find work, and when he does, it is not so much because of his skills as because of his connections. Find me a recent mainstream American movie that blames unemployment on anything other than affirmative action or pure laziness and I will acclaim you a god of popular culture (unless, of course, you relay the information in a particularly irritating way, in which case I'll be hard put to be civil). Still, it is true that, while the best summary of the movie's plot is that it's about out-of-work steelworkers who become strippers, it doesn't much discuss why they're out of work or what might be done to change that on a national or international scale.

In any case, the other participant in this discussion pointed out that, whatever the relative political merits of the two movies, Britain's Channel Four (which more or less *is* the British studio system at this point) is willing to make movies about working-class people embedded in working-class culture. Again, let me know if you see a lot of this in Hollywood movies—I sure don't. Why? Why does it seem to be so much easier for British people (studio executives, even) to acknowledge the existence of a working class which has been shat upon by business and government alike than it is for people in the US?

have no trouble understanding why Americans would prefer movies about unemployed working-class people in England to equivalent movies about the US: Besides the inevitable joy that this is not about our problems, there is the question of accents. Think about it: Would you have enjoyed *The Full Monty* so much without the excellent accents? I would have had a particularly hard time dealing with male strippers with, say, New Jersey accents. (Interesting, isn't it, how in the US, regional accents are almost always used to connote ignorance or crudity.) But if the accent thing were the complete answer to this problem, then you'd think that these movies would have no audience at all in Britain. They'd only be reaching us as part of an exchange program in which we sent movies about bunches of guys with New Jersey accents over there. This is not, to my knowledge, the case.

It's not just that the British are better at making films about the working class; they're better at making films about gay men, too. Think about *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Priest*, and *Beautiful Thing*; all good movies about gay men actually having relationships (or sex, anyway). It almost seems unfair to bring this up given that Hollywood and the American moviegoing public have just taken a big step with *In & Out*, but let's face it—when Kevin Kline and Tom Selleck kiss in *In & Out*, it's mostly done for laughs and that's the end of it. When the queer characters in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Priest*, and *Beautiful Thing* kiss, it's not comedic and it very clearly leads up to sex. So what is the key thing that makes British popular culture so much braver, more progressive, whatever you'd call the difference between theirs and ours? It's not like England's some lefty utopia, after all; we had Reagan and Bush, they had Thatcher and Major. Hell, we have Clinton, they have Blair. I have a vague sense that it's more or less the same thing. So that's not it. My gut feeling is that it has something to do with how much the US sucks, but this is hardly a sufficient answer; it would be nice to know the origins of this sucking and maybe what can be done about it, both in direct political action and in popular culture.

It is true that England is a fairly explicitly classed society, whereas we have in the US this idea that everyone is middle class unless they are homeless or have a trust fund exceeding \$100 million. Obviously, this is bullshit, but I suppose we're hardly going to have movies about a working class that we refuse to admit exists. Still, I don't see why the admission of the existence of a working class makes members thereof any more desirable as main characters of mainstream movies. I mean, there are all sorts of groups that Americans basically understand exist, but which we only rarely get movies about. Smart interesting people, for instance.



# AFTER SHUTDOWN

by Brian Edwards-Tiekert

Take a drive down route 9 sometime. Pick it up behind Main Street, follow it south, and in five minutes' time the Middletown sprawl fades into unbroken lines of trees. This is Haddam, the Connecticut countryside. This time of year, the rolling hills are carpeted with fallen leaves. The smell of woodsmoke hangs heavy in the crisp air. There's a century-old opera house on the east bank of the Connecticut River. Less than a mile downstream is the scenic Connecticut Yankee nuclear power plant.

Never heard of it?

Less than 9 miles from campus, CY is one of the oldest, most dangerous reactors in the country. Recent investigation of the plant has uncovered design flaws, misinstalled parts, and deteriorated safety components that had not been replaced. Some crucial safety equipment hadn't been operable since the day the plant opened. Makes you wonder what they're thinking.

Northeast Utilities (NU) is the operator of the CY plant. On three separate occasions, the company's been fined \$100,000 for harassing employees who pushed safety concerns. The attitude toward safety problems is this: don't even *report* it until you can come up with a cheap way to fix it. Needless to say, many problems never get fixed or reported.

Northeast Utilities also operates the three Millstone reactors in Connecticut, all of which are closed right now because of safety problems. At Millstone 3, NU substituted a fast-drying concrete for the standard Portland cement to save time building the plant; now the foundation is eroding away from under the reactor. At Millstone 2, in what was supposed to be a contained environment, they discovered a hole the size of a "doggie door" in a wall near the fuel pool. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission mandates a 250-hour cooling period for burnt atomic fuel before refueling can take place. At Millstone 1, the company cut costs by reducing this to 60 hours, releasing radioactive contaminants into the air and endangering workers—at one time the work environment was so hot that workers' rubber shoes melted.

According to Public Citizen's Nuclear Lemon report the Haddam reactor is the worst in the country in the category of 'significant events,' potentially disastrous accidents. Last August a series of human mistakes and the failure of an emergency coolant pump brought the reactor within 52 minutes of a Three Mile Island-scale accident. Last November, two workers were badly contaminated while doing work in a transfer canal: no-one had informed them of the high levels

of contamination in the tunnel, no-one had briefed them on proper procedure for minimizing exposure; they didn't even wear breathing masks. Since its inception, the plant has been releasing ten times as much Tritium (a radioactive carcinogen) into the Connecticut River as any other plant in operation releases, including plants twice its size. This September, state officials discovered that two fuel leaks during the plant's operation had contaminated the surrounding land as far out as a shooting range a mile away; CT Yankee didn't stop running the reactor until months after it discovered the second leak.

For years, the Connecticut Yankee plant was considered one of the nuclear industry's better performers because it had a life-time generating capacity of 75%. When these safety violations came to light, it became clear that the plant's high output was not a sign of success, but rather of the company's ability to conceal safety risks and a complete disregard for the risks of pushing an unsafe reactor. After operations halted for safety reasons last year, Northeast Utilities determined that it would be cheaper to decommission the plant now than to bring it up to code and continue to run it. Now, ten years before its license expires, the Connecticut Yankee Reactor is being shut down for good.

The same operators who mismanaged the plant in the past will be dismantling it now; the utility notorious for violating safety codes and then lying about it will be in charge of the operation. Local citizen's groups question the competence of the operators and the possibility of an accident during the dismantling of the plant that could release contamination and expose workers.

More importantly, the early decommissioning of the Connecticut Yankee plant raises issues confronting the nuclear industry at large. This is the beginning of the end of our country's first generation of nuclear reactors. Twenty-four other reactors face premature shutdown in the next seven years. Some of them will close because of parts that deteriorated much faster than the designers anticipated—at the now-retired Yankee Rowe reactor in Massachusetts, prolonged exposure to heavy radiation had made the reactor vessel extremely brittle and unsafe. Deregulation of the power industry and increased competition will force utilities to close many of their reactors because of the high cost of operation.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has approved two programs for decommissioning plants, SAFSTORE and DECON. Under SAFSTORE opera-



tors close the plant and the radioactive equipment within it decays naturally over for 30 years or more. Over those 30 years, the radioactivity in the plant dwindles to a tenth of its original level, and the plant can be decommissioned more safely. DECON is the quick-and-dirty approach: the utility removes all equipment from the plant immediately, packages it, and ships it to a low-level radioactive waste dump.

Environmentalists and activist groups like Reactor Watchdog and the Citizen's Awareness Network promote SAFSTORE because it sharply reduces the risk of worker exposure during the dismantling process and public exposure from shipments of the radioactive waste traveling down our highways. Nuclear power companies tend to favor DECON for financial reasons. As soon as the company dismantles and removes the plant, the property taxes on the land are sharply reduced. What's more, as soon as the radioactive waste is shipped off-site, the utility is no longer responsible (or liable)—it becomes the taxpayer's responsibility. And the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), is doing everything it can to help plants push through hasty, unsafe decommissionings.

Historically, the NRC and the nuclear power industry have been pretty cozy. A decade-old directive on 'enforcement discretion' lets the NRC selectively neglect safety issues at plants to save costs. The Commission typically turns a blind eye toward safety violations until a third party, be it state officials, local activists, or whistleblowers, forces it to enforce its own standards. The NRC relies on plant operators to provide much of the information it needs to evaluate safety and performance. Funded entirely by fees that the plants and utilities pay, the NRC is actually dependent on the industry for its own survival. What's more, many officials just happen to find lucrative employment in the nuclear industry after they leave the NRC.

Five years ago Yankee Rowe in Massachusetts shut down because local organizing efforts revealed severe age-related dangers at the plant. Having been in operation for 30 years, it was the country's oldest commercial reactor. At the time the NRC had to see and approve a decommissioning plan before major dismantlement could take place. When the reactor ceased operation, it announced its intention to remain in SAFESTOR while it developed such a plan. That year, the NRC changed its rule to allow Yankee Rowe to strip the reactor before any decommissioning plan was approved. Ninety percent of the radioactive material in the plant was removed without any approved plan.

The Citizen's Awareness Network (CAN) took the NRC to court because it had rejected CAN's

request for a public hearing before the decommissioning. The NRC's own rules mandated such a hearing. The court decision found the NRC to be "arbitrary, capricious, and utterly irrational." A bit late perhaps, but gratifying.

Since then the NRC has changed its rules to deregulate decommissioning, cut the NRC's degree of oversight, and to eliminate the public hearing requirement. CAN is challenging the new rules on constitutional grounds. Meanwhile, Connecticut Yankee will be the first plant to be decommissioned under the new rules. As the plant proceeds with plans for immediate dismantlement, what happens will set a precedent for the decommissioning of all reactors in the near future.

On October 27, the NRC held a poorly publicized public meeting to discuss decommissioning activities at the Connecticut Yankee Plant. About 30 people from the community and nearby areas sat in the back of the fluorescent-lit high school auditorium. Northeast Utilities flew in about 20 officials and experts in dark suits who had been coached on how to field questions. So did the NRC. They sat together at the front of the room and addressed one another on a

first-name basis. They put on a 2-hour presentation that nobody in the room understood, and then took turns answering questions from workers, activists, and community-members.

There were two ways they responded to difficult questions: by avoiding the question and talking about something else, and by burying their replies in enough technical jargon to make whoever asked the ques-

tion feel to stupid to follow it up.

"Which decommissioning method is safer for workers?" asked a large mustachioed activist.

"Well," came the reply. "You can rest assured that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has established a limit as to how many rems a nuclear worker can be exposed to in one year." The light glared off his glasses, hiding his eyes. "And during the dismantling procedure, we're planning on being well below that limit." In other words: 'we haven't *planned* on breaking the law or having any accidents, so don't worry, they'll be safe.'

The aging of our nuclear reactors brings to light a larger problem: how do we dispose of the nuclear waste from these reactors? The dismantling of each old reactor produces tens of thousands of tons of low-level radioactive waste—everything from the reactor vessel to its concrete foundation is contaminated with radioactivity by the time a plant shuts down. Currently, this waste is disposed of in landfills even though it is *impossible* to build a landfill that won't leak eventually. Three of our country's 6 radioactive





landfills have been closed because of leakage resulting in severe environmental contamination. The landfill in Barnwell, SC, where waste from the Connecticut Yankee plant will be shipped, is leaking radioactive material that's contaminated the groundwater and continues to migrate off-site into the town's aquifers.

The situation is even worse for high level. To date, our reactors have produced 30,000 tons of high-level waste; it is predicted that the current generation of reactors will produce 85,000 more. This waste is so hot that the radioactivity would kill you in less than 3 minutes if you stood a meter away. It will be dangerous for the next 240,000 years. And, so far, we haven't been able to approve a site to dispose of it.

For years now, the industry's been pressuring the government to approve a storage site in Yucca Mountain in Nevada, on Shoshone land. The plan is to seal casks of high-level waste in the mountain. There are numerous concerns over seismic activity in the area, the ground-water level, and the percolation of rainwater through the mountain. An earthquake could raise the groundwater level up to the storage chamber: if plutonium in the spent fuel were exposed to the groundwater, it could trigger an explosion releasing massive amounts of radioactivity. The site will never meet current standards for a high-level waste facility.

The nuclear industry's response? Lower standards.

Senate Bill s-104 (and its counterpart in the House, HR 1270) provides for thousands of shipments of high-level waste from reactor sites across the country to the site in Nevada. They would be placed in an interim storage facility (something akin to a parking lot with a fence around it) on the plain in front of Yucca Mountain while the permanent facility was built. To get the site approved, the bills pre-empt standards for the permanent storage of high-level waste.

As soon as the government approves a high-level storage site, utilities cease to be responsible for the nuclear waste they've produced. Once moved from storage pools at reactors across the country, the spent fuel becomes an enormous taxpayer liability.

The flood of waste being transported across the nation would pose a huge health and safety risk to the public at large. High level waste would be shipped along our highways in barbell-shaped casks containing 20 times the radioactivity released by the Hiroshima bomb. Railway shipments would be 10 times larger. Over the next 30 years, 100,000 of these shipments would pass through 43 states on their way to Yucca mountain. Thirteen hundred highway shipments would pass through Connecticut alone. The Department of Energy's records on highway and railway accident rates indicate that we can expect 210-354 accidents involving these shipments.

How bad is an accident? In some scenarios the casks wouldn't even be breached. Others could have the effect of a mobile Chernobyl. A DOE report warns

that a scenario involving a high speed impact, long duration fire, and fuel oxidation would contaminate a 42 square mile area, require 462 days to clean up, and cost taxpayers \$620 million.

Opponents of the bill support dry-cask storage of the waste on the reactor sites. Many claim that 'disposal' of the waste will never be a viable option, that this is not a problem we can simply toss away. Good for up to a hundred years, the casks would let the spent fuel be contained and monitored at the utilities' expense, buying us time to come up with better storage options. Over that time, the waste would naturally become less radioactive and easier to handle.

The nuclear industry has pumped \$13 million dollars of campaign contributions into congress since the bill was introduced. This summer S-104 passed the senate with 64 votes. The House of Representatives has yet to vote on HR 1270, but President Clinton has promised a veto if it passes (as it most likely will). Opponents to the bill in the Senate have only a two-vote margin protecting the one-third minority they need to support a veto.

"Out of sight, out of mind" has been the motto of our approach to nuclear waste. 50 years of living in a 'disposable' culture has left us thinking that we can just throw away our problems and forget about them. The problem is that there *is* no safe way to dispose of radioactive waste: it's too long-lived, unstable, and dangerous. Every radioactive dump site is an accident waiting to happen; the question is not if, but when something will go wrong. And if we just bury our nuclear waste to get rid of it, we'll have a hell of a time getting at it when there is a problem.

"Ignore it, and it'll disappear" is an attitude that seemed to characterize Northeast Utilities' approach to safety problems at the Connecticut Yankee plant. It's an attitude that we're inclined to fall back on when we confront a problem as immense and terrifying as that posed by the nuclear industry. If we're not careful, that attitude could open Yucca Mountain to the dumping of high-level radioactive waste, and have a major impact on the next 240,000 years of human history.

Small grassroots citizen's action groups like CAN have made the first inroads into changing this attitude in the industry, and have proven that 'little' people can make a big difference. By focusing public attention on safety issues, they've been instrumental in the early closing of two plants. By exposing the NRC's gross negligence of its duties, they've forced it to become more aggressive in policing utilities.

If you want to help out, or if you want to learn more, you can contact them: Citizen's Awareness Network, Box 83, Shelburne Falls, MA 01370, 54 Old Turnpike Road, Haddam CT 06438 T/F: (413) 339-8768/4374/ (860) 345-8431 can@shaysnet.com, www.shaysnet.com/~can





# RETHINKING THE CLOSET

## WHY SOMETIMES WE DON'T COME OUT

by Aongus Burke

A few weeks ago queer people all over the United States celebrated National Coming Out Day. At Wesleyan, queer and queer-friendly students commemorated the day by donning blue jeans and rainbows, throwing an ultrahip party at Eclectic, and engaging in the somehow always controversial act of chalking the campus. Ironically, very few of the day's activities involved encouraging people to actually come out of the closet. Rather the day was devoted to celebrating queer sexuality, culture and pride.

Which, in my view, will probably do a lot more to bring people out of the closet than another series of exhortations to "come out, come out wherever you are." Believe me, we hear enough of that all year. Queer people are constantly being urged to come out of the closet. "If every gay person came out to his or her family, a hundred million Americans could be brought to our side. Employers and straight friends could mean a hundred million," states one typical queer journalist. I suppose when we start coming out to our clergymen, mailmen, bank tellers, and cable guys we'll get that last 50 million.

Don't get me wrong: coming out of the closet can be an immensely uplifting experience. I was on the verge of killing myself before I started to come out to people last year; today I'm pretty happy. But what about the scores of teachers who have lost their jobs because they came out? The thousands of military personnel who have been dishonorably discharged? The teenagers who get beaten up every day because of their bravery? Obviously, not everyone's experience with coming out has been as positive as mine.

But, then, I'm not sure I really have come out. I mean, sure, I write these gay-themed articles for *Hermes*, am pretty active in Queer Alliance and BiLeGa, and sometimes even just tell people outright that I'm a big homo. Yet I'm not out to most of my high school friends or even most of my family. Not

everyone at Wesleyan (gasp) reads *Hermes* or knows about any of my other forms of activism.

Most importantly, I'm constantly meeting new people who don't know anything about me.

So it's clear that I'm not out to everyone, even though I never can be quite sure about who knows and who doesn't. And these things will never change. "The deadly elasticity of the heterosexist presumption," writes eminent queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "means that, like Wendy in Peter Pan, people find new [closet] walls springing up around them." Each new person encountered demands "new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure."

Sedgwick's remarks remind us that the closet is a sociological structure, not merely a psychological one. Our tendency to understand coming out as a brave act

of personal transformation prevents us from criticizing the presumption of heterosexuality or cultural conditions that make coming out so difficult in the first place.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault

argued that the homosexual was invented by the medical establishment in the late 19th century:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage...[H]is sexuality...was everywhere present in him: at the root of all of his actions...The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.

This passage is without a doubt the most famous in the entire discipline we today call queer theory. One reason is because it speaks to a lot of queer people who have wrestled with the issue of coming out. Like me.

This past summer I was catching up with a close high school friend. Our conversation, of course, even-

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tually turned to sex. While I was debating whether or not I should come out to him, he startled me by revealing he almost went to bed with a male friend of his after a night of partying, drinking, and drugs. I responded by telling him with a grin on my face that bisexual behavior was pretty common at Wesleyan. He asked me how many people I had had sex with at Wesleyan during the past year.

"Well, just one really," I responded.

And what of the people who overcome all of this, who manage to salvage some self-worth and who want to come out, but cannot? These include people who work in corporations and know that if they come out, they'll never get promoted because the old boy's network upstairs don't want a queer using their bathroom. These include politicians who fear that revealing their sexuality will cost them their positions, who feel they can only protect their closets by voting for

Think of how afraid you were of being called a faggot when you were little.

"A guy or a girl?" he asked, then quickly adding, "Well, of course, a girl..."

"No, actually a

You didn't even know what a faggot really was,

homophobic legislation. These include actors and

but you were taught not to do anything that might make you seem like one.

guy," I interjected. I smiled again and went back to my fries. After a short pause, the conversation returned to sex, but he guided it to a more abstract level. I didn't protest.

Why didn't I tell him that I was gay? Why didn't I tell him that I didn't just have sex with this guy, but a pretty intense, caring relationship with him? These aren't difficult questions to answer. It's one thing to tell someone that you occasionally like to fuck other guys. It makes you seem rebellious, uninhibited. But it's another to say that you're gay, that you might actually have feelings for the guy you fuck.

Our society has projected the most revolting sort of otherness on to this homosexual species of which Foucault speaks. Think of how afraid you were of being called a faggot when you were little. You didn't even know what a faggot really was but you were taught to stay away from them and not to do anything that might make you seem like one. Remember how gross you thought heterosexual sex was the first time you heard about it? How people had to convince you that it wasn't, that you'd feel differently about it in a few years? You probably thought gay sex was pretty gross too the first time you heard about it. Did anyone around you suggest that you might feel differently in a few years? Probably not — they were too busy making sure you understood how gross it really was. Who would ever want to be the kind of degenerate that could enjoy it?

actresses who know that coming out will foreclose any opportunities to ever play a heterosexual role again. In his 1993 book *Queer in America: Sex, the Media, and the Closets of Power*, Michaelangelo Signorile details dozens of examples of people who have felt this sort of bind. He notes how our theoretically unbiased news media details every banal turn in the love lives of heterosexual celebrities while protecting the closets of others. Ellen DeGeneres's sexuality was an open secret among tabloid journalists for years; only when DeGeneres herself publicly came out did they begin reporting the story. Wouldn't Jim Carrey and Lauren Holly or Brad Pitt and Gwyneth Paltrow have loved it if the media were so cooperative? Apparently the life of closeted celebrities is gross and unreportable, but the public has every right to know what's in Pitt's garbage.

I can only laugh when some fool rants in a Wespeak about how Queer Alliance chalkings are too "in your face." Heteronormativity has been rammed down our throats every day of our lives. It is heteronormativity, not our own lack of bravery, that has produced the closets within which we have been forced to live. It is heteronormativity that creates the psychological, political, and economic incentives to remain in the closets that it creates. Undermining heteronormativity through open displays and celebrations of queer sexuality is the only way we will ever destroy the closet once and for all.





# Dragons, Bodice-Ripping, Class and Gender

by Laura Clawson

I live in a college town. Northampton's downtown is filled with pottery and craft shops, little galleries, and restaurants. The two or three chain stores on Main Street are a major source of anxiety to local professionals, and when one of the seven independent bookstores downtown went out of business, Barnes & Noble and Media Play were widely blamed. (The ability of a city of 30,000 to support seven bookstores was not discussed.)

One of these bookstores sells only science fiction/fantasy and mystery books. The others in which I have shopped have science fiction/fantasy sections, in addition to sections for mysteries, literature, photography, poetry, and many kinds of nonfiction, from self help to history. They carry a wide range of science fiction and fantasy; books by most well-known authors of the genres, including Greg Bear, Kim Stanley Robinson, Orson Scott Card, Ursula LeGuin, Anne McCaffrey, Mercedes Lackey, and Marion Zimmer Bradley, are easily available, as are Star Trek spin-offs. Most of the SF/F authors in these bookstores have won awards such as the Hugo or the Nebula; very few have written best-selling books. At the same time, due to limited shelf space, there are few authors who are not established in the field, and they tend to disappear quickly unless

**To find the romances, you bypass the men selling computer equipment and pet food and the thick crowd of very butch men at the table of skin magazines.**

discuss it with their customers, many of whom they also know. These customers are mostly white adults secure enough in their middle-class status to shop while somewhat dishevelled—jeans and casual shirts or sweaters are the norm, and while most of the women have clean hair (the men are more likely to look a bit greasy), obviously styled hair is extremely rare. There are usually more women than men, but the proportions are not hugely uneven, and both men and

women, particularly mystery readers, interact with clerks. Some have children with them, but few have more than one child. The children often sit by the children's books looking at the pictures while

their parents shop.

To buy romances in town, you have to go to the supermarkets a half-mile or more off of Main Street which carry, in addition to children's books and whatever is on the bestseller lists, several shelves of romance novels. The books are in a double-wide aisle, in the middle of which is usually a rack of series romances. The single-title books on the main display are almost all by bestselling authors such as Jude Deveraux, Johanna Lindsey, Judith McNaught, Nora Roberts, and Janet Dailey. In such a small space, you don't get emerging authors or more than a quarter of the backlist of a major author. It's an impersonal place to shop, and one where the staff tends to know more about produce than they do about books. There are usually more women than men in the grocery store as a whole, and I cannot remember seeing a man at the bookshelves.

For a wider selection, you can drive fifteen or twenty minutes to either Barnes & Noble or Media Play. These are the stores widely held to be responsible for the decline

of the independent bookstore; they are also the only stores I know that treat romances and SF/F in the same way. Each genre has its own section, which, in addition to carrying the same books that the supermarkets and the independents have, usually has more titles by those same authors and by authors who cannot be reliably found in the smaller selections of booksellers in town (who pay higher rents for space downtown).

**The class status of those who are imagined to (or actually do) read a given genre is reflected very clearly in where it is sold.**

they become established.

None of these stores have sections for romance novels; some keep a few romances by best-selling authors shelved with the literature. One has a policy against carrying romances, and the staff become surly when you inquire about them. In general, though, the stores are friendly places to shop; in several of them, the employees know the stock and are eager to

The budget romance reader has a number of options (not counting the used book stores in town), including the town library, which carries some romances, again mostly those by bestselling authors. If you finish all of the library's books or want ones by more obscure authors, you need to buy books, but there are still ways to reduce the amount of money you spend, such as the book exchange shelves at the library, which contain a high proportion of romances, or the exchange shelves in some of the area's cheaper beauty salons, which have only romances. A group of friends who read romances could also circulate them among themselves.

Jackson's Flea Market is another option, if you have time. Every Sunday, in what used to be a department store in the dead mall one town over from mine, dozens of vendors—ranging from dedicated amateurs to shopowners bringing part of their stock to a new location—set up tables and shelves of everything you can imagine. There's a professional bookseller who's always at the entrance selling paperbacks for \$1 each; he carries mostly horror and suspense books, with maybe ten romances a week. If you go past him, you may have to search for half an hour or so to find any more romances, but the ones you eventually find will cost only fifty cents or a quarter.

To find the romances, you bypass the men selling computer equipment and pet food and the thick crowd of very butch men at the table of skin magazines. It's worth looking at the rare book dealers' shelves; sometimes they'll have eight or ten romances. Mostly, though, you don't find romances on bookshelves. You thread your way through narrow aisles, dodging the families that block the way as the adults try desperately to keep their several young children together. These are not people you see in Northampton; their slovenliness carries none of the air of privilege that is apparent in town. The romances are hard to spot, in boxes on or under tables covered with little figurines, costume jewelry, and children's toys. These tables are usually run by couples, but the men

will not deal with the books. If you try to pay them for a book, even if the price is clearly marked, they call their wives over. The women who sell them sometimes ask what you're looking for and offer suggestions, or they ask how often you get to read. In July, one told me that she had to wait until school started in the fall to read any more. Her husband never looked at me, although they had no other customers while I was there.

Buying books is, in short, a thoroughly classed and gendered experience. According to the 1995 Consumer Research Study on Book Purchasing, while only 15% of American households have an income of over \$75,000, 26% of book-buying households are in this income group, and households with under \$30,000 make up 44% of the general population but only 32% of book-buyers. The same is true of education: 8% of the population has some graduate education, but 19% of bookbuyers do. Eighteen percent of the population did not graduate from high school, something that is true of only 7% of book-buyers. In both income and education, the groups between the extremes I have mentioned represent roughly equivalent parts of the general and book-buying populations. Moreover, women buy an overwhelming proportion of the fiction sold in this country: a 1994 survey found that women were 59% of fiction buyers, while recent estimates by booksellers have 70 to 80% of fiction bought by women.

These statistics are interesting in and of themselves, but what I find more interesting is the way that the reading of different genres—namely, romances and science fiction/fantasy—is classed and gendered even more than reading generally is. The class status of those who are imagined to (or actually do) read a given genre and the cultural capital that it carries are reflected very clearly in where it is sold. The message in this imagining is that science fiction/fantasy is bought by the kind of serious book buyers who spend their time in a downtown with stores that sell specialty goods and expensive artsy gifts and for whom books are to be in their own store, set apart from other commodities; romances, on the other hand, are bought by people who will not go much out of their way for books, which must therefore





be set somewhere between immensely practical goods such as cereal and pet food.

And gender, in my experience, is not particularly apparent in upscale bookstores—the ones downtown—where you might almost think that men and women buy books in equal numbers. But in chain stores and, more, places that sell things other than books, it is readily apparent. The social system implied by the ways that science fiction/fantasy and romance books are sold, then, is this: If you are a member of or are closely allied with the intellectual upper-middle class, you live in a world of largely ungendered public spaces in which you can expect personal service from knowledgeable clerks. You may read genre fiction, such as SF/F or mysteries, but you do not read romances. If, on the other hand, you are lower-middle class and a woman, you shop in highly gendered spaces in which the clerks can't be expected to know much about any one of thousands of products. You read only bestsellers—some horror and suspense, but mostly romances.

This system is, of course, only implied, and its boundaries are continually crossed. Upper-middle-class intellectuals go to the grocery store, and sometimes they may even buy books there. Independent bookstores are open to whoever comes in, regardless of how much hairspray they may use. But I find the strength with which it is implied, and the literary hierarchy that it delineates, to be deeply disturbing. Why is romance, a genre associated almost entirely with women, associated also with more lower-middle-class sites of cultural transmission, and why is it so widely considered the lowest form of literature (when it is even called literature)?

Why is science fiction/fantasy, even SF/F written and mostly read by women, seen as attracting a more educated and sophisticated readership, and why does it supposedly have more literary value?

Most of us have at least heard these associations made, even if we ourselves do not completely believe that this is how the world of reading (or the world in general) works. How did this come to be? Is SF/F so different from romance—high-grade genre fiction with liberatory potential as opposed to regressive

patriarchal drivel?

Popular romances and popular science fiction/fantasy aren't so very different at all. And yet most of us have heard someone admit apologetically that they're reading a "trashy bodice ripper romance." I do it, half the time laughing at myself. When was the last time someone told you they were reading "some trashy book with a dragon on the cover" in that same embarrassed and slightly contemptuous tone? I don't do that, even though I know that it's the same damned thing.

I can't answer these questions right here and now. It would take pages and if I succeeded, I'd

**If SF/F gets to claim Mary Shelley, why can't romance successfully claim Jane Austen?**

**Or if SF/F gets Ursula LeGuin and James Tiptree, Jr., why doesn't romance get any of a number of authors who write "literary" fiction about people falling in love?**

have to wonder why I'm writing a whole thesis about it. I can only suggest a few answers.

I think that romance has suffered from an arbitrary separation between genre romance and literary romance; a separation to which science fiction/fantasy has not been subject. If SF/F gets to claim Mary Shelley, why can't romance successfully claim Jane Austen? Or if SF/F gets Ursula LeGuin and James Tiptree, Jr., why doesn't romance get any of a number of authors who write "literary" fiction about people falling in love? (I also think that the distinction

between genre and literary fiction is largely stupid, but I won't go there now.)

At base, I think that the perceived difference between SF/F and romance comes from a suspicion of women's, particularly working-class women's, pleasure and

fantasy. SF/F that is unabashedly about women's pleasure and fantasy comes under less suspicion because it is, after all, part of a genre that has historically been read and written by men and because, for whatever reason, it is more associated with the upper-middle class. But that's sort of an obvious answer, and an insufficient one. It is, unfortunately, as deep as I'm going to go at the moment.

**In July, one woman told me that she had to wait until school started in the fall to read any more. Her husband never looked at me, although they had no other customers while I was there.**





# Working For the Man

## A Rant Against the Consulting Craze

The other day I was sitting in PAC 422, waiting for class to start, and one of my fellow classmates asked another about starting salaries for management consultants at financial firms. Immediately about half of the class was involved in the conversation. "I know someone who's getting sixty thousand." "Just write 'flexible' under 'desired salary.'" "Forty to seventy thousand is standard, but you don't want to ask for seventy."

Now granted this was a CSS class, so I shouldn't be that surprised that greed and avarice were

*by Livia Gershon*

Which is just the point. We (not all of us—much as it pains me to do so, I acknowledge

that the majority of my class may be Republicans, New Democrats, or genuinely apathetic—but enough of us to matter) just spent four years as moderately active left-liberals, and now we're going to work for J.P. Morgan? Does this not strike anyone else as really gross?

Yeah, I know, you have loans to pay off, and anyway you're only going to spend a year or two selling your soul to the Man and feeling thoroughly miserable, after which you're going to graduate school and then settling in to a good, heart-warming career. Fair enough (though I feel I should caution you about thinking you're going to outsmart the Man once he gets his neatly-trimmed fingernails into you), but there are other ways to pay off loans and still manage to feed yourself. For example, take one of those heart-

warming jobs right now (no self-respecting leftish non-profit organization expects you to have a graduate degree) and learn to make Jaggermeister-and-Cokes yourself instead of going to a bar. Live in a hovel. Or at least outside Manhattan. Really, I've heard Queens isn't that bad. Or try begging or prostitution—very

**How on earth are liberal arts graduates who are completely confused about their own lives getting jobs giving other people advice?**

the overwhelming themes of the conversation. (I'll try to refrain here from making a joke about Hobbes that no one outside the major would find remotely funny.) But I know seniors from all kinds of majors who are applying for these "consulting" jobs. I don't even understand what consultants do. As I overheard someone ask, how on earth are liberal arts graduates who are completely confused about their own lives getting jobs giving other people advice?

But as near as I can tell, all these consulting applications give the lie to that Ani line about generally her generation not being caught dead working for the Man. Whatever consulting firms may or may not be, they are definitely the province of the Man. As are many of the other jobs us graduating seniors are trying to get working for the big multinationals that all seem to be owned by Microsoft or Pepsi.

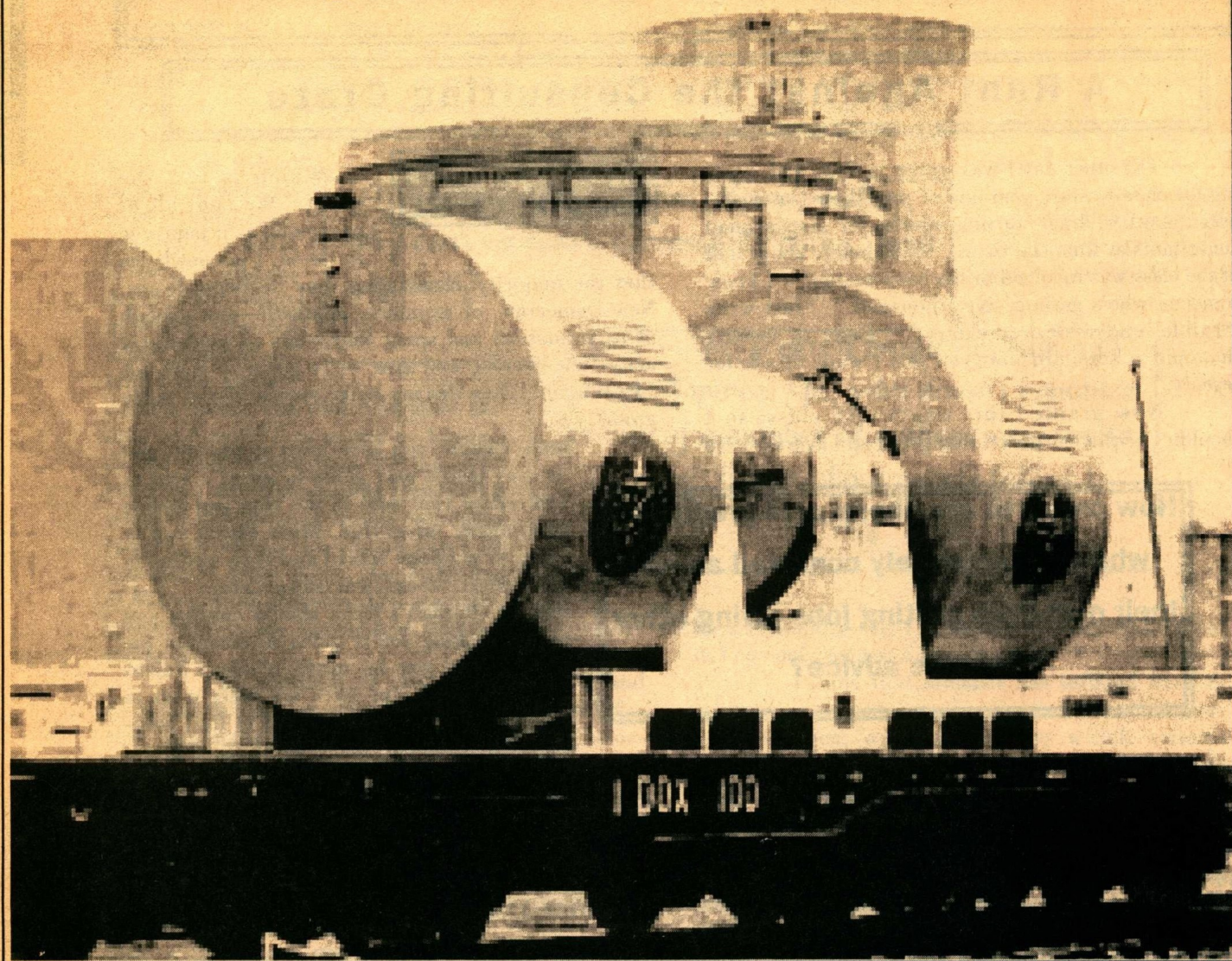
I'm not going to waste my energy here arguing against the Man. Most of us at this school have already spent a fair amount of energy doing that—in speeches about police brutality, women's studies papers, embittered conversations about the exploitation of Latin America in the café over cups of Starbucks, Wespeaks against oppression and in favor of human kindness.

**I'm not going to waste my energy here arguing against the Man. Most of us at this school have already spent a fair amount of energy doing that.**

few pimps are invested in Tibet.

Anyway, all this is not to say that I plan to smash racism, patriarchy, and international capitalism immediately upon graduation. I plan to drive around the country, burning fossil fuel, romanticizing poverty, and contributing absolutely nothing to society for the six months' grace time on my loans. But at least, unlike other ways of selling one's soul to the Man, that sounds like fun.

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